

Sussex County Breaks Ground on Runway Extension Project at County Airport

Georgetown, Del., Aug. 17, 2012: The flaps are down and the engine is revved up on a years-long plan to upgrade the Sussex County Airport, where a longer runway could help Southern Delaware land more aircraft, and more job opportunities, for the local economy.

Sussex County leaders welcomed Delaware Gov. Jack Markell and Transportation Secretary Shailen Bhatt, as well as U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, Congressman John Carney and a host of other dignitaries Friday, Aug. 17, to break ground on a \$4.4 million project that will extend the 5,000-foot-long main runway at the Sussex County Airport near Georgetown. Construction begins later this month, and will last until late 2013.

The 500-foot extension project has been years in the making, and is the first step in a larger \$25 million, multi-phase plan to modernize the airport with a longer runway, redesigned taxiways, and improved lighting. The eventual goal is to extend the main runway another 500 feet, to a full 6,000 feet, by 2017.

Those improvements will make the facility more accessible and safer for larger aircraft, and could open up new opportunities for businesses that use – or are considering using – the adjacent industrial park as their base of operations.

“That’s what this all comes down to – jobs and the economic well-being of our county,” said County Council President Michael H. Vincent. “This facility is a major component to our local economy, with tens of thousands of aircraft landings each year and hundreds of our citizens employed in good-paying jobs here. We must do all that we can to ensure this airport

is safe, attractive, and most of all competitive so that it can draw new business and keep business here in Sussex County for many years to come.”

The Sussex County Airport, a former Navy airfield, is a general aviation facility popular with pilots of small single-engine aircraft and corporate jets. It serves as a transportation gateway for numerous businesses and corporations in the county, including 16 employers in the Sussex County Industrial Park. The complex is a vital economic engine in Sussex County, employing approximately 900 people who work in everything from manufacturing and poultry processing to storage and distribution. It is also home to Delaware Technical & Community College’s aircraft maintenance education program.

“This project gives some lift to jobs and businesses,” Gov. Markell said. “It will strengthen the airport’s ability to compete regionally and better position Sussex County to respond to economic opportunities. It’s not just good for Sussex; it’s good for all of Delaware.”

For nearly a decade, the County has been developing a long-term plan to extend the airport’s main runway, which is necessary to accommodate larger aircraft, including Boeing 757s. Boeing 737 models already fly to and from the airport for interior conversion work at manufacturer PATS Aircraft Systems; PATS has plans to service the larger Boeing 757s, but because of the runway’s current length, the company cannot accommodate those planes.

This first phase of construction will be funded mostly through grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, which was supported by Delaware’s Congressional delegation – Sens. Carper and Chris Coons, and Congressman Carney, all of whom touted the project’s benefits.

In July, the FAA awarded a \$3.1 million grant to fund the

500-foot runway and taxiway construction; that was on top of nearly \$950,000 the FAA awarded previously for design work and environmental assessments. The balance of the first 500-foot extension project's cost, about \$450,000, will be split by the County and State.

"Extending the main runway at the Sussex County Airport is an important investment for Delaware's aviation industry and the state as a whole," Congressman Carney said. "Infrastructure is critical to a strong economy. The extra 500 feet is an important step to helping existing businesses, like PATS Aircraft, expand. It will also attract new companies to Delaware and help create jobs. I'm excited that construction is now underway, and look forward to a larger, more accommodating airport in Sussex County."

Added Sen. Carper, "Today is a great day as the Sussex County Airport runway extension project breaks ground. This construction will allow larger aircraft to utilize the airport and attract new business opportunities in Sussex County. This project will also allow existing businesses such as PATS Aircraft Systems to grow. Today's groundbreaking symbolizes the beginning of a period of economic growth for the airport, Sussex County and Delaware."

U.S. Sen. Chris Coons said projects such as this make Delaware fertile economic ground. "Infrastructure plays such an important role in helping businesses grow and create jobs," Sen. Coons said. "Extending the Sussex County Airport runway is a wise investment in Delaware's general aviation sector. The additional 500 feet of runway will allow existing businesses to grow, entrepreneurs to develop new businesses, and for jobs to be created."

County officials are already looking beyond this 500-foot extension to further improve the airport. A second extension, which would add the next 500 feet for a total runway length of 6,000 feet, is still in the planning stages. That phase would

require moving nearby Park Avenue, also known as Truck Route 9, to extend the runway and expand the protection zone surrounding it.

County officials have been diligently working with State and federal officials to put together a funding solution to make the final phase of the project possible. Earlier this year, the Delaware Infrastructure Investment Committee approved a \$3.7 million grant from the New Jobs Infrastructure Fund, contingent on federal highway dollars being made available for the road realignment. Meantime, State lawmakers in June, led by Sen. Joe Booth of Georgetown, approved \$800,000 in the Bond Bill to pay for design work on the Park Avenue realignment. County leaders anticipate that phase to begin in 2014.

“It has taken the County some time to get to this point, but we are very excited to see this construction begin,” County Administrator Todd F. Lawson said. “It shows we’re making progress. With the continued efforts of our partners at DelDOT, the FAA, the governor, the General Assembly and our Congressional delegation, we will get this project in the air.”